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THE OSAGE MOURNING-WAR CEREMONY

By GEORGE A. DORSEY

The material for the following account of this interesting Osage ceremony was collected in April of this year, while the writer was engaged in work, among certain tribes in Oklahoma, for the Field Columbian Museum. On only three of the four ceremonial days were observations made; whatever is here recorded of the other ceremonial day or of events after the ceremony, was obtained largely from Charles Michell, an English-speaking Osage who took an active part in the performance. It must be admitted at once that the present account is, at best, incomplete and fragmentary, and may be regarded of value only as an introduction to a more exhaustive study, which shall give due justice to this interesting rite and curious survival of ancient Osage ceremony.

The spirit of a dead Osage must be avenged, whether the dead be a child, woman, warrior, or old man; this is done by the sacrifice of the scalp of an enemy over the grave. The fulfilment of this obligation is in the immediate charge of a very near relative of the decedent. But before the scalp of an enemy may be obtained, it is necessary that certain rites be performed; in other words, there must be a war dance or ceremony. When, therefore, an Osage by the name of Nahashköshī lost a favorite son, he became a mourner and it fell to his lot to make provision for the war ceremony. But as there is considerable expense attendant upon the performance of this ceremony, Nahashköshī was assisted by other mourners, who also wished to satisfy the demands of their deceased relatives. These other mourners were Wainashie and his wife, and William Fletcher. As Nahashköshī, however,

was chief mourner, the preliminary work of preparation, and especially the choosing of the men to perform the ceremony, were largely in his hands. Therefore, after consulting with his friends he chose two groups — one for the north and one for the south — of four men each. These men were, for the north, Nahinshinka, William Pryor, Big Heart, and John Logan; for the south, Emory Gibson, Hisimoi, Hunkahapi, and Kowahatze. There were thus two men to each mourner, and they were spoken of as helpers.

The head-man of these two groups, together with the mourners, then appointed a time for the ceremony, and all the heads of families among the Osage were notified of the date. The ceremony was to be held at the permanent camp, about two miles east of the agency at Pawhuska. On the day preceding the beginning of the ceremony, the camp was largely augmented by the arrival of many friends of the mourners from Hominy, Gray Horse, and other points on the Osage reservation.

First Day

Early in the morning the four mourners, with their helpers, repaired to an open spot of the prairie lying just beyond and to the west of the camp. Here were selected two men whose duty it was to watch or guard the camp. Of these Tcepakake took his stand on the northwest and carried in his hand a new knife; on the southwest stood Weyekaha, carrying a new hatchet. While the others were making certain preparations the two leaders, Gibson and Nahinshinka, made the entire circuit of the large camp, the former making a dextral circuit, while the latter made a sinistral circuit. As they proceeded, all were careful not to cross their path and to keep out of their way. From time to time they cried out, "Something must die in the west!"

In the meantime two tents had been erected in a north-south line, facing west and about fifty yards apart. These and other preparations were made by younger members of different

societies who, whenever sent on errands, always ran, in accordance with one of the strict regulations of the ceremony. In the northern tent Nahinshinka and his companions took their place, while in the southern tent were Gibson and his followers. Walking back and forth between and in front of the two tents were the four mourners, each muffled from head to foot in a dark gray blanket. On the back of each was a tobacco-bag and a pipe suspended by a cord passing over his shoulders; each also carried a stout forked stick about four feet long, on which they supported themselves from time to time, for the mourners are not permitted to sit down from sunrise to sunset.

Also occupying the open space in front of the tents were two men who played an important part in the ceremony. These were Suquoiinka (Chicken Catcher) for the north side and Waiglalinkia for the south side. Of these, Suquoiinka was the more important personage, as he was the real leader of the warrior party (*Washapewinwashowagre*). Both these men were naked except for a loin-cloth. They were painted on the chest with a large circular spot in black, from which extended two black parallel zigzag lines which terminated on the shoulder. Each also carried on his back a tobacco-bag with a pipe suspended from a bandoleer. Before one can assume the position of either of these two men he must have been a mourner several times and have given the ceremony. Preparations continued in each tent for the performance. Friends of the mourners and members of the warrior orders gathered at one or the other of the two tents, bringing with them two large drums. The eight helpers in the two tents now painted their faces, having brought with them bags or boxes of paint. Much of the facial painting was in colors, each man wearing his own appropriate paint. All eight men, however, decorated a portion of their faces with black, — the sign of war, — and all wore leggings and moccasins. Two of the men wore on their heads the Osage red and black ornament of elk and turkey hair.

A fire was now kindled to the north of the south tent, and at this the drums were warmed in order to tighten the heads. At about ten oclock the head-men of the two tents, Gibson and Nahinshinka, again made the circuit of the entire camp, the one from the north tent going by the way of the south, while the one from the south tent went in the opposite direction. They were mounted on horses, and each announced several times that the ceremony was about to begin and asked the men to go to the scene of the ceremony to dance.

On the return to the tents, those on the south side began drumming and singing, while William Pryor, from the north side, stepped out into the open space between the tents and danced. He carried a wooden staff about four feet long, terminating in a crook, and covered from end to end with cotton. He wore only a loin-cloth; the upper part of his body, including his face, was painted black, while on each leg were two parallel, zigzag lines also in black. At the conclusion of the song the drummers on the north side sang, while Hisimoi danced out from the south side. He also carried a crook, and was dressed and painted as was Pryor.

After a lapse of about half an hour, during which time many warriors appeared, arrayed for the dance, all four mourners began a circuit of the entire camp, going first south, then east, and returning by the north side. They were followed by the two head-warriors; then came the singers, with their drum, from the north side, who were followed by the eight assistants and all the dancers from the north tent. As they proceeded to make the circuit of the camp they halted from time to time and sang while all danced except the mourners and the two head-warriors. Pryor and Hisimoi carried their crooks, while Big Heart, Logan, Hunkahapi, and Kowahatze carried shields on their backs. Each of the eight helpers also carried a large gourd rattle.

After their return from dancing around the circle they all rested for a while, except the mourners, warriors, and watchers,

who, as noted before, do not sit while the sun is visible. Then the circuit of the camp was again made as before, except that this time the drummers and dancers came from the south tent, while the circuit was to the north, east, and south, the exact reverse of the first course. By the time they had returned to the tents, nearly all the inhabitants of the camp had arrived, their number having been greatly augmented by the appearance at this time of two or three hundred children from the government school, which had been dismissed that the children might witness the afternoon performance.

At about two oclock prepared food in liberal quantities was provided for the warriors, helpers, and dancers. This was brought to the two tents by the women of the camp, most of whom came from the houses of the friends and relatives of the mourners. The musicians and all those who had danced voluntarily to show their respect for the mourners, ate first. Then a small portion of food was put into the mouths of the mourners, and after them the warriors and helpers ate. The women and children, all gaily dressed and resplendent in beaded buckskin, ribbons, and bright-colored shawls, then came forward, ate a little, and removed the remainder of the food. During the progress of the feast the two warriors kept crying out for the people to bring presents of goods to be given to the poor, and also for payment to the warriors and helpers for their assistance in the ceremony.

A rather long interval now followed, while the helpers and the volunteers repainted themselves in brilliant colors for the afternoon dance. When all were ready they again formed in line and danced entirely around the camp, as they had done during the forenoon, first making a dextral circuit, then a sinistral circuit, and so on until nearly sunset. The remaining dance of the day was to the setting sun. The drummers and singers of both tents now joined forces and took up a position directly to the west and between the two tents. Then the dancers of both sides came forward and danced in front of and to the west of the drummers. The two

sides did not unite, but danced in two concentric circles, open at one point, so that at one time the men from the north would be on the outside, then the two circles would continue moving until the men from the south would be on the outside. At the head of each line was a man bearing a standard which had stood during the day, one to the west of the north tent, the other just east of the south tent. The dancers now rested, while one of the warriors told his war story, at the conclusion of which they beat the drum. Then they sang and danced again, and rested while the other warrior related his war experience.

The sun was now about to set, whereupon the volunteers stepped to one side (the singers maintaining their position) while the eight helpers formed themselves into a crescent-shaped line in front of the musicians, all facing the west. At each end of the line was one of the two standard-bearers, while in front of them, and therefore not obstructing the western view, were the mourners, the two head-warriors, and the watchers. All the dancers now became seated, whereupon the musicians began a song and the head-man on the south side stood up, danced a few moments in the line, then stepped in front of the line and danced until the end of the song, when he resumed his place in the line and sat down. Another song was started, and the head-man on the north side, sitting next to the one who had just danced, arose and repeated the performance. Thus they continued to dance until each man in the line had had his turn, a man from the south side succeeding one from the north, and so on, back and forth, until the ends of the line were reached.

It was now nearly dark, and the performance for the day was at an end. Food was again brought and eaten as at noon. Then blankets were brought for the helpers and the two warriors, while four small, improvised canvas shelters were provided for the four mourners, the openings being toward the east. The musicians and all others who had volunteered their services during the day now repaired to their lodges for the night.

Second and Third Days

The performances on the second day were exactly similar to those of the first, except that there were no preliminary preparations, such as the selection of the ground, the erection of the tents, etc., although the announcements were made as before.

The method of procedure on the third day was like that of the second, except that on this day two additional crooks were introduced. These took precedence over the crooks carried on the first two days and were borne by the leading helpers of the two sides — Emory Gibson and Nahinshinka.

Fourth Day

Early on the morning of the fourth day the helpers and all those who were to take part in the ceremony brought to the tents their sacred bundles (*wahope*). They all now formed in line, the watchers first, then the mourners, warriors, drummers, helpers, and dancers, and proceeded to the west about two hundred yards, where they halted and made a temporary camp. A song was begun and the dancers danced for the benefit of the mourners. Then they danced in a circle, surrounding all who were to join in the hunt. Then the mourners thrust their forked sticks in the ground, the sacred bundles were opened, and a bird, usually a hawk, was taken from each one. The bundles were then tied up, and some of them were hung on the forked sticks while others were taken in charge by boys who were to go on the hunt. The birds were then suspended on the backs of all the warriors by means of buckskin bandoleers specially constructed for that purpose and always found in the bundle. The watchers and the mourners now remained behind while all the others set off to the west, armed with guns and bows and arrows, to spend the remainder of the day, or so much of it as might be necessary, in killing a deer. Of course in former times this was a war party and the object of their hunt was scalps.

As soon as a deer had been killed the party reunited and the helpers severed the head from the body; the head was then fastened down with the four crooks and left. The boys who had been carrying the sacred bundles in the rear came up in the meantime and repacked the bundles, placing the bird-skins back in their proper position. The entire party then returned to the mourners' camp, bearing with them the headless deer, upon which they feasted. One of the warriors had already provided himself with some human hair, which he now distributed among the mourners, in lieu of the scalps. As the hair was handed to each mourner, he exclaimed, "This is what I want! I am glad I have it!" Each mourner next visited the grave of the person for whom he had been mourning and deposited a portion of the hair over the grave; another portion was fastened to the bird belonging to the sacred bundle, while the remainder was attached to the stem of the pipe, which he had carried constantly on his back for four days. Thus ended the period of mourning.

Formerly, on the morning following the fourth day the bundles were opened and prayers were made to the bird for specific blessings, a stick for each blessing invoked being laid by the side of the bird. The bird was then painted and replaced in the bundle. Then followed four additional days of dancing and ceremony, celebrating the success of the war expedition.